



# *Connecticut Leads the Way With School Readiness and Early Reading Success*

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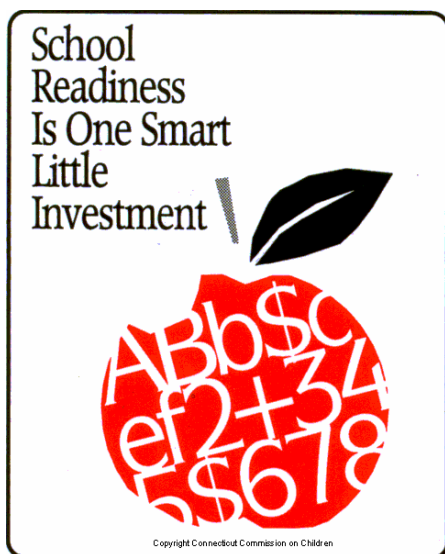
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## **Connecticut Leads the Way With School Readiness and Early Reading Success**

By Elaine Zimmerman

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## **Growth Plan for School Readiness in Connecticut**

**Provide pre-K to priority school districts, priority schools and transitional school districts.** There is a shortage of preschool programs in Connecticut. Priority schools and transitional school districts also seek quality School Readiness programs. Eighteen thousand (18,000) children in priority school districts alone lack options.

**Maintain quality.** National and state research show that the outcomes of preschool do not endure without quality such as preschool standards, benchmarks, small class size, health and safety protections, teachers trained in how children develop and how they learn and developmentally appropriate practice.

**Keep the school readiness legislation paradigm.** The infrastructure that has been designed for the state's school readiness system is working. The School Readiness Councils provide oversight. The partnership and co-location of dollars between DSS and SDE provides resources to stretch across all 12 months and to address full-day care, as needed by working parents and parents in job training.

**Provide preschool-age children with learning opportunities in high-quality language and literature-rich environments.** More than one-third of children entering kindergarten are unprepared for school challenges. Of every 100 children who leave first grade as poor readers, 88 will still be poor readers at the end of third grade, limiting their chances of academic and future workforce success. (NLC Institute for Youth, Education and Families).

**Address the need for facilities growth.** There is not enough space or safe space (up and out of basements) for children to play and learn while in preschool. CHEFA funding needs to be opened up again to expand the space and safe facilities for young children.

**Link school readiness and school steadiness (k-3)** through quality teacher training, pre-literacy and early reading success strategies and transition to school plans that better coordinate the preschool with the elementary school.



**Ensure that the comprehensive supports such as nutrition and health care access are in place.** Children must receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies.



## Background on School Readiness Legislation

In 1997, Connecticut unanimously passed landmark school readiness legislation (Public Act 97-259) that reflected a comprehensive commitment to best practices in early learning. With full support of the Governor, the Legislature and the Executive Branch Departments, this initiative signaled a commitment to preparing children for kindergarten before their first day of school. It addressed quality, research-based practice, standards and accountability.

This model policy has been praised for its infrastructure, service integration and use of public and private dollars to maximize impact and efficiencies. The policy is well regarded by the public, but has not yet been brought to scale for all children in Connecticut.

Key components of the legislation include:

### A Broad Reach

**Children's Ages** - Provides a preschool program for both three-and four-year olds.

**Access** - Provides a program for families across incomes with a sliding scale to allow both state and personal payments.

### Ensuring Excellence

#### **Educational Excellence and Standards**

- Requires the State Department of Education to develop quality standards and benchmarking of school readiness.

**Early Literacy** - Requires pre-literacy in the community school readiness plans to help

young children develop oral language skills, comfort and familiarity with books.

### **A Career Ladder and Accreditation**

**Training** - Supports a career ladder for early educators with work experience, training and diverse early care and education courses counting as part of a substantive career path. Concurrently, early education programs are supported in the accreditation process through five technical assistance sites.



**Quality** - Bolsters quality through a requirement of accreditation with nationally recognized standards including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and/or Head Start standards.

### **Transition to Elementary School** –

Builds a bridge between preschool and formal schooling through transition to school planning. Preschool and kindergarten teachers are encouraged to share information on the children's gains in preschool as they enter kindergarten.

**Quality Enhancement Dollars** - Sets aside resources for quality enhancements in preschool, to be determined by local School Readiness Councils. Quality enhancements may include accreditation, comprehensive services, educational equipment, teacher training and scholarships, health consultants, and assistance in preschool planning for growth in supply and facilities.





## Consumer Needs

**Pooling of Funds and Resources** - Wraps child care dollars around school readiness dollars to extend the program from 2.5 hours to full day, allowing further learning opportunity for children who might benefit from a more comprehensive program. Offers a two department partnership and maximizes resources within each.

**Contemporary Time Frames** - Stresses year-round programming to address both child learning needs and workforce trends.

## Health and Safety

**Health Care for Every Child** - Requires a health screen and a medical provider for each child. Virtually every child under the school readiness legislation has health care and a medical provider or home.

**Protects Children** – Protects children from adults with history of aggression, child abuse or illicit activity through mandatory background checks of early education teachers.

## Local Governance Structure

**Local Coordination and Planning** - Establishes local School Readiness Councils to determine the assets, gaps and needs for quality preschool programs in the town and to determine which agencies shall receive allocations. Brings city and education together by appointing the Mayor and

Superintendent of Schools as School Readiness Co-Chairs.

**Parent Involvement** - Expects providers to work with parents as partners, reading to their children, volunteering, complimenting the curriculum at home. Encourages participation for parents as key decision-makers for their children.



## Program Expansion and Facilities Growth

**Facilities Financing Program** – Creates a public - private partnership for facilities loan funds to address renovation, safety, relocation and facilities expansion.

**Evaluation** - Builds in a longitudinal evaluation of child outcomes in school readiness to ascertain what needs to be modified and what needs to be expanded in this model initiative.

## Summary

The majority of these school readiness legislative components address quality, consumer need and service integration. As preschool is brought to scale and universality is considered, the existing school readiness components in the legislation offer quality, a state commitment to infrastructure and accountability for excellence.



"It is vital that our state invest in the future by giving all Connecticut schoolchildren access to a quality preschool experience. All children should enter kindergarten ready for school success so that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential."

Lt. Governor M. Jodi Rell

### Brain Development: The Crucial First Years

Why are the earliest years so important to a child's healthy development?

Critical neurological development occurs in early childhood. The brain develops to 90% of its capacity in a child's first five years.

Children are born ready to learn. From birth to kindergarten, they are making significant linguistic and cognitive gains and rapid progress in emotional and social capacities.

Links between an infant's 100 billion neurons must be hardwired through stimulation and interactions, because the brain will produce few more links after infancy. These crucial links provide the needed power for vision, hearing, language, emotions and movement.

Links activated many times by repeated early experience tend to become permanent. Links not used often enough tend to be eliminated.



*"Learning is an investment with real earning power. It pays off for the individual's quality of life and the community gains as well. Children learn and teach other children what they have learned."*

Representative Demetrios Giannaros  
Co-Chair, Education Committee

## High-Quality Preschool Produces Lasting Outcomes

Current research in Connecticut unerringly supports an investment in quality preschool:

### Middletown

- In Middletown, the availability of a school readiness program accounted for a significant increase in the number of low-income African-American children "ready"

for school – from 87.1 percent (who did not attend) to 96.0 percent (who did attend). Among white children in general, 96.97 percent were prepared for school.

- Low-income African-American children who attended the Middletown school readiness program attained an average school readiness score (55.63) that was

comparable to white children in general (57.59) and surpassed both white low-income children (51.16) and low-income African-American children who did not attend a school readiness program (48.37).

### **Bridgeport**

- Bridgeport children who had quality early care and education had fewer retentions, more frequent attendance, and higher reading scores throughout grades K-2 than those who without such programming.
- In the Bridgeport study, 47 percent of 1st grade students (45 out of 96 students) who did not have quality early care and education were retained, compared with only one percent of students (one out of 88 students) who had quality early care and education.



- The dramatic decrease in retention in Bridgeport's school readiness program saved significant tax dollars. Retentions in K-2 cost \$622,644 for the control group and \$113,208 for the school readiness children who were observed.

### **Hartford**

- Hartford children who participated in organized early childhood programs and experiences scored significantly higher on school readiness skills than children who did not participate.

*"We're proud of the investment we've made in early childhood."*

Representative Robert M. Ward



### **Milford**

- Children who attended a high-quality preschool program were significantly more school ready upon kindergarten entry and more successful in school than children who did not attend. Children studied were from primarily white, middle-income backgrounds and were identified as being at high risk for educational failure or having special education need.
- Children in the Milford high-quality preschool program gained an average of four points (95.0 to 99.0) on age appropriate tests in language, motor skills and concept development. Children who did not attend a high-quality program lost developmental ground, experiencing a decline in test scores (92.6 to 91.5) over the same period.
- Preschool programs saved Milford approximately \$3 million over five years in reduced expenditures on outside special education tuition and transportation.

### **Stamford**

- A Stamford study found that school readiness led to many gains once children from such programs reached school. Children from Stamford school readiness programs, compared to children with no preschool background, had:
  - higher reading achievement (in kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grades)
  - higher report card marks in many areas (in kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grades)
  - fewer retentions
  - higher attendance rates (in kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grades)
  - fewer ESL and bi-lingual placements



## Quality Preschool and Preliteracy Experience Affects the Achievement Gap

On the 2002 Connecticut Mastery Test, in reading, math and writing, minority and lower-income students performed at significantly lower levels than non-minority and higher-income students.

- In 4th grade reading, 67 percent of white students met the goal, compared to 27 percent of African-American students and 24 percent of Hispanic students.
- In 4th grade math, 71 percent of white students met the goal, compared to 31 percent of African-American students and 33 percent of Hispanic students.
- Fourth grade students in communities with the lowest household income and level of education (Ed. Reference Group I) performed much more poorly than those students in the other Education Reference Groups on the 2002 Mastery Test.



*"It's simple. Early childhood education works and the difference it makes lasts a lifetime."*

Senate President Pro Tempore  
Kevin B. Sullivan



*"The doors of opportunity swing open to a child who is taught to read and made ready for school. They can slam shut for a child denied that helping hand."*

Moira K. Lyons, Speaker  
House of Representatives

## Early Reading Success Starts Early

**The Challenge** - The nation is beginning to see, from brain research, that reading is teachable to 95 percent of our youngsters. Yet, the National Institute of Health has just defined the lack of reading skills as a major public health issue.

Why? Ten to forty percent of children will have difficulty learning to read and will need specialized instruction. Children who have reading problems in third grade have reading problems in later grades. Children with reading and writing difficulty fall further

behind each year that they do not receive support.

### **The Loss to A Child Without Literacy Skills**

- If intervention does not happen early, there is a risk of it becoming quite difficult to catch up. More than 1/3 of children from low-income communities enter formal kindergarten classes already behind their peers. By fourth grade more than 50 percent of these children will not meet the standard for reading proficiency.

What happens to the child who does not have the capacity to read words? Often emptiness,

self-shame, distancing, loss of connection to context, and a wandering away from formal learning.



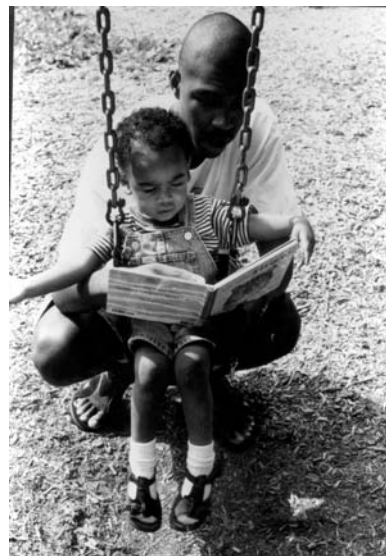
**Connecticut's Response** - Connecticut researched what might be done differently to address childhood reading difficulty. The Education Committee found that teacher training in the science of reading is the critical factor in prevention and substantive intervention of reading problems. To understand printed language well enough to teach it explicitly requires disciplined study of its systems and forms, both spoken and written.

**Reading Panel Findings** - Legislation established an Early Reading Success Panel to ascertain the skills and knowledge a teacher needs to teach reading effectively. The report stresses that competence in preliteracy and oral language are the foundation for literacy.

*"Beyond a doubt, reading early, by the end of first grade, links one benefit to another; enjoyment of reading, exposure to the language in books, and attainment of knowledge about the world. All accrue in greater measure to those who learned how to read before the end of first grade."*

American Federation of Teachers

**What Can Be Done in Preschool with Preliteracy?** - Clearly teaching reading does not begin in kindergarten. There are numerous activities that child care providers and early educators can perform in preschool settings to help children in preliteracy skills development. Also, parents are key to ensure love of language and curiosity in daily life.



Before entering formal education, children should:

- Have more than 1000 hours of experiences with books, alphabet games, storybook reading and activities.
- Enjoy books and language and see the purpose of reading.



- Have been included in conversation and treated as successful speakers and listeners.
- Have engaged in playtime that employs symbols (acting out roles, designing stories and using props.)
- Be exposed to print and writing in their daily life.
- Understand how to handle books and know that print moves left to right.



- Have been read to by an adult who supports the child's view and creativity during the reading aloud.



The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association have adopted a position paper entitled *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*.

They stress that young children in preschool benefit significantly from:

- Being read to aloud and being asked to be active participants in the reading.
- Understanding that print carries a message.
- Engaging in reading and writing attempts.
- Identifying labels and signs in their environment.
- Understanding that there is a connection between letters and sounds.
- Linguistic awareness games, nursery rhymes and rhythmic activity. (Phonemic awareness, a powerful predictor of later reading success, is found in traditional rhyming, skipping and word games.)
- Letter sound matches and some letter identification.
- Temporary invented spelling to represent written language.



#### **Teachers in preschool can:**

- Share books with children, including Big Books and model reading behaviors.
- Talk about letters by name and sounds.
- Establish a literacy-rich environment.
- Re-read favorite stories.
- Engage children in language games.
- Promote literacy-related play activities.
- Encourage children to experiment with writing.

#### **Parent and family members can:**

- Read and re-read stories with predictable text to children.
- Encourage children to recount experiences and describe ideas and art that are important to them.
- Visit the library.
- Talk with children and engage them in conversation, give them the names of things.
- Provide opportunities for children to draw and print, using markers crayons and pencils.

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